

CONTAINERS FOR BONSAI – SOME CONSIDERATIONS

I really like the way that my teacher, Ryan Neil, discusses every aspect of bonsai in terms of two fundamental considerations: **Function** and **Aesthetics**.

When we consider containers for bonsai, these same two sets of factors need to be weighed. Let's look first at function. What do we need to think about when we evaluate a potential container for a given tree?

- 1. Is the size and shape of the container adequate and appropriate for the given bonsai?** Will it accommodate the root mass and keep the tree healthy? Is it possible to modify or reduce the root mass in order to fit into a more desirable container? Obviously, some of these questions can only be answered after removing the tree from its present growing medium and examining the root mass. Which is a good reason to accumulate a variety of sizes and shapes of containers, over a period of time, so choices are possible and you are not saddled with one preconceived option.
- 2. Will the proposed container provide the tree with a desirable balance of water and oxygen?** This is a somewhat complicated question because it is affected by several factors: the species of the plant, the growing medium, and, not least, how often you are available to water the tree. From a visual standpoint, you may feel that the tree would look great in a shallow container. But if you're not around to water the bonsai twice a day in the heat of summer, this may not be the best option for the health (or survival) of the tree; and a more prudent choice may be a deeper pot.
- 3. Does the container provide adequate drainage?** We've all seen beautiful containers that have one small drainage hole in the center. Such a pot may be useful for a tree that likes fairly moist substrate most of the time, but it can be very risky for other bonsai that need more oxygen in the soil and more thorough drainage after watering.

- 4. Does the container provide adequate means to anchor the tree?** The best container designs often provide small holes to accommodate anchorage wires, in addition to larger drainage holes. Coming back to that beautiful pot with one small drainage hole, without modification such a container can offer significant challenges for anchoring the tree. Of course there is always the option of drilling additional anchorage holes (or even holes for drainage), using tile drill bits, but such modifications require skill and are not always easy to accomplish.

These are some of the basic functional considerations when evaluating a container for your tree. Now let's look at aesthetic considerations related to the tree-container interface:

- 1. Size** – As I noted in the April, 2018, RMBS newsletter, probably the biggest mistake that bonsai novices make is to plant a tree in a container that is way too large. This not only creates a problem of visual proportion, it may also negatively affect the health of the tree because there's a good chance, with all that extra soil, that the tree will not dry out sufficiently between waterings. Once you have a handle on what's going on with the root mass and how roots may be reduced, it's generally a good idea to place the tree in the smallest possible container that will accommodate the (potentially modified) root mass and allow for the reasonable introduction of new bonsai substrate, with chopsticking. In the best of all worlds, this is the container that the tree will live in for the foreseeable future, although there are exceptions to this rule.
- 2. Depth of Container** – From an aesthetic viewpoint, to the extent that we reduce the width of a container it must get deeper in order to visually balance the composition. If the selected pot is wider, it needs to get shallower for the same visual reason. Ryan refers to this principle as the "Rubber Band Theory" of container selection. However, as noted above, the environment we live in (hot summer sun and very low ambient humidity), coupled with your availability for watering, can affect your decision about depth of container. Our first responsibility is to keep the tree alive and strive for its ultimate health.

3. Clay Color and Texture – Every ceramicist has clay bodies that they work with; so, if you are commissioning a custom container, you have the potential to dictate the color and texture of the clay to be used. Most of us do not have that luxury, but the following items should be considered: the color of the container should *hint at* a minor color present in the tree's form or details, e.g. its bark or the color of its foliage. The objective is for the container to *complement* the colors of the tree, not to match them. The same consideration applies to the container's texture. It should not *mimic* the texture of the bark or foliage but should hint at or complement them.

4. Traditional Shapes of Containers:

Rectangular Pots are generally suitable for gutsy, masculine trees. The extra space in the corners of a rectangular pot (as compared to similar sized oval) can overpower a more delicate, feminine tree. The rectangular shape is angular, thick and powerful. But there can be subtleties within these parameters. For example, a rectangle with radiused corners appears softer and can work with a tree that is not so powerful.

Oval Pots are more elegant and feminine; they have soft movement, no sharp corners and are smoother. Oval pots generally complement a more graceful, lyrical tree.

Square Containers are often used for cascade or semi-cascade bonsai, but again there are subtleties that relate to the visual balance or apparent "stability" of the pot. If the tree is a true cascade that drops immediately from the edge of the pot, we can use a pot that has a narrower bottom than its rim. If, however, the tree is a semi-cascade and the center of gravity is away from the container, it is more appropriate to use a container that "appears" to be more stable (i.e. one whose bottom is closer to the size of the rim). The depth of a square pot should generally not exceed the width of the rim.

Round Containers, like oval containers, are more elegant and feminine. The same general rules of proportion apply to round

containers as for square ones, if they are used for cascade or semi-cascade trees. Shallow circular containers are well suited to bunjin or literati style bonsai, especially when the base of the pot is narrower than the rim. When using this type of delicate shallow container, the apex of the tree should typically be within the width of the pot rim. The exception is the tyco (drum) pot, which has a visual stability that enables an informal upright tree to have an apex beyond the rim of the pot.

When a pot has only three feet, one of the feet should be positioned directly under the direction in which the trunk is moving, in order to provide both functional and visual stability.

Lotus Pots are “asexual. They are suitable for a tree that has some strong masculine qualities but may also have some feminine softness, because these pots still have some hard inside edges, so they are not as feminine as an oval or circular pot. Also, lotus pots are generally deeper.

Hexagonal or Octagonal Containers are also “asexual.” Octagonals tend to be more feminine because the width of any given side is smaller and more delicate. Hexagonals or octagonals are usually fairly deep and are suitable for cascade or semi-cascade trees.

Floral Rim Containers are sort of a variant of a round container. They are very appropriate for deciduous trees, seldom for conifers. This is generally a very feminine form.

Free-form Containers tend to convey a more direct expression of where the tree came from or was growing when collected. These are often more “organic” forms that leave less to the viewer’s imagination. Unless this style of container has been commissioned for a specific tree, a great deal of care is needed to match an appropriate tree to the character of the pot. This can be tricky, but the results can also be very dramatic. Often free-form containers do not have traditional “feet,” but they must be designed to accommodate positive drainage.

You will note that, throughout this paper, I have used the terms “container” and “pot” somewhat interchangeably. I actually prefer the term “container” because it does not limit our thinking and visualization to the traditional Japanese styles of pots as described above. Bonsai can be cultivated on stone (or concrete) slabs, they can be planted *within* appropriately prepared stone formations, and they can be placed within made-made objects. Probably the most absurd example of this latter option was the bonsai planted in an antique Hoover vacuum cleaner at the Artisans Cup.

In my opinion, the key thing to remember is that the tree and its container form a symbiotic composition. Each should complement the other, and generally the container should not command visual prominence over the tree. The tree is the star of the show, but its container can go far to enhance its impact.

Tom Anglewicz
April, 2018